

REVIEW OF GLOUCESTERTIDE

“Gloucestertide” by Jonathan Bayliss (Protean Press, 1996) continues the spasmodic look at Gloucester (Dogtown) and a few of its more interesting and atypical inhabitants. Interesting, that is, if one counts personal ineptitude, eccentricity, and a loose regard for sexual constraints as interesting aspects of human life. Underlying all these frailties and follies is the need for money, a matter of great and possibly corrupting sense in some of the major figures. In a book in which there are no heroes, there is one proximate villain. This turns out not to be Arthur Halmboyd, part owner of the sprawling Parity business conglomerate but Father Christopher Lucey whose pursuit of money and power, when not otherwise occupied with his pursuit of young men, beclouds the purpose of his calling, and the existence of his two-monk monastery compound.

I prefer to give the 17th century credit rather than to trace Bayliss’s indebtedness to 19th century English and American authors who tried to go as far they could with long words, long sentences, long paragraphs, and long and repetitious attempts at humor. Even though Bayliss wrote a book in the vein of the 17th century “The Anatomy of Melancholy” by Robert Burton and “Religio Medici” by Sir Thomas Browne, he alluded frequently to works by 19th century author Herman Melville to extend or enhance episodes. Melville’s novel “Redburn” gets the most recognition, though the titles, if not the contents of other works --- “Omoo”, “White Jacket”, “Mardi” “Pierre” and “Clarel” --- get occasional nods.

Some of Bayliss’s sentences defy comprehension; that is, no doubt what he wanted them to do. Here is but one of many examples;

Before even the Controller foresaw that usury would interbreed with advertising and amusements to disqualify manufacturing as the golden goose of free-enterprise prosperity --- when lending money at interest would no longer be justified

primarily as a facilitation of production or distribution, and private debt would be universally urged to usurp thrift as a national virtue, with the lure of demotic credit cards that profit not only original gatherers of savings, and the financial retailers but also a cascade of middlemen in manifold money-changing and commission taking --- long before the nation was actually possessed by such a self-defeating economy, the Classic Order of the Vine (as well as the Petrine workers and a few scholastic theologians) was attempting to define in terms of Christian doctrine the sin of usury as overpowering the cannibalism of mass consumption.

This jabberwocky is not quite Lewis Carroll or James Joyce, but it clearly echoes the obfuscation of business tycoons who do not want rivals to know what they are up to; Many of Bayliss's double-edged assertions consist of paradoxes, puns and puzzles supposedly or reputedly based on speculations of writers such as Otto Rank (Auto Drang), Alfred North Whitehead (Alpha Whitehead), Fayaway Morgan (Margaret Mead), Norbert Weiner. Martin Heidegger, Soren Kierkegaard and Erwin Schrodinger. Bayliss's pet names for some of his notables are momentarily amusing: Ezra Sterling (Ezra Proud) and T. S. Chitterling (T. S. Eliot) but, in the long run, they could have been left out. According to my read the Irish poet William Butler Yeats gets more mention than any other writer. These allusions have to do with Yeat's love of Maud Gonne, his theatrical aspirations, contempt for his audience, and his interest in the occult. In the sections devoted to the Classic Order of the Divine, Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) becomes an ideal or standard by which Fathers Lancelot Duncannon and Christopher Lucey measure themselves or Bayliss measures them. Though one can be sure of few things in regards to the many ambivalences in this novel, both priests appear to lack the dignity, courage and fidelity of their mentor, not to mention the monastic vows of obedience, poverty and chastity.

At first I was inclined to take the religious intentions and practices of the Tudor-Petrine, read Anglican, Classic Order of the Vine and its

often-mentioned opposite, the Pentecostal Brotherhood of the Peaceable Kingdom, located in the deepest Amazon, as serious meditations and proscriptions for living a better life. Like the treatment of love, or more precisely amorous attachment, the treatment of religion is so cavalier and tongue-in-check, that I am now inclined to doubt its psychological and metaphysical value. Of course some have claimed (I think it was Saint Augustine!) that doubters and sinners make the best saints; but this latter term Bayliss bestows on elite members of the canine kingdom. Though Caleb Carcist, Bayliss's central mouthpiece, is more muddled, confused and opportunistic than Hamlet, many accessory characters also appear in mocking guises. Who in this novel doesn't wear cap and bells? A glossary or computer would come in handy for no matter how minor or insignificant a character may at first appear to be, he or she is sure to make additional appearances, or --- if not that --- to be the source of additional jokes. Typically what may at first seem like an exalted ascent to the sublime becomes a noisy decline to the dump. This second volume along with the first and no doubt the third --- if it ever appears -- - are lessons in the art of contretemps.

Since the style is beset with so many twistings and windings, there are moments when slogging one's way through does not seem worth the effort. Unlike Henry James or Marcel Proust sentences are generally short and there are no dependent clauses that follow dependent clauses. Bayliss appears to have taken his reader's exasperation into account. In a manner reminiscent of Henry Fielding, author of the often-bedded "Tom Jones", Bayliss perks up interest by introducing sexual passages. Actually there is more talk about sex than consummations, but when these do occur they are hilarious as when after page after page about Caleb's fixation on Lillian Cloud his landlady, Gloria Keith, overpowers him. Indeed for all his longing, women in Caleb's life are more likely to be seducers, though, since he is so drab and puny, their attraction remains a mystery. Maybe the women like the talk of sex more than the practice. Fortunately for him Caleb is well versed in badinage.

A rare critic and possibly reader has made the point that Bayliss seems to be condemning modern life for its greed and the capitalist system which is its predominant form in the United States as somehow destructive of qualities which are aesthetic or that would lead “pilgrims” on voyages of creativity and discovery; not to mention the system’s likelihood (or certainty) of booms and busts. Yet ‘pilgrim’, meaning tourist, and “kilroy”; meaning driver of heavy rigs transporting frozen fish, are two of the most derogatory terms in the book.

Since so many of the characters, from whatever persuasion, are held up to ridicule, I do not find Bayliss’s scorn for modernity to be altogether the case. He is fascinated by the intricacy of machinery and the chicanery of the free market as reflected in the quasi-legal machinations of the Graveyard, read Wall Street. Bayliss shows how the lending and borrowing of money and the charging of interest can lead to moral and physical failure (or to hypocrisy) and commends Catholicrats (Democrats), despite backslidings to Rate of Return (ROT), and deprecates Procrustians (Republicans), who don’t backslide as they are already happily there. As Caleb asserts sometimes proudly and sometimes sotto voce, he is a member of the Resistance.

Bayliss delights in describing scenes and scenery in Gloucester, Massachusetts but he also delights in describing scenery in locations outside Gloucester. The description of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge is masterful whereas the description of Purdeyville, read the existing Dogtown moraine that captivated artist Marsden Hartley, is misleading and perfunctory. Bayliss’s cosmopolitan, philosophical and economic interests tend to disperse attention away from a city renowned for its sights and smells. The famous Saint Peter Festival held in Gloucester in the last week of June is barely glimpsed. Instead Bayliss concentrates on the simultaneous Chapter of the Vine meeting which is to disclose (maybe?) the perfidy of Father Christopher Lucey’s backroom shenanigans and the identity (maybe?) of Caleb’s father, an obsession that flickers throughout the narrative and gives it a hesitant resolution. Caleb says he needs to know who his father was so he can

get a passport to England, which is a lame, possibly implausible, excuse not in the tradition of Homer's Telemachus, Shakespeare's Hamlet and Joyce's Stephen Dedalus.

I do not pretend to offer a key to the book, but I think the brief description of the rotating performance of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* by local high school thespians conveys a hint of what is to recur over and over in the book. "Miss Johnson the legendary spinster who teaches the honors English class sets [her students] to write on the theatrical issues raised by the two plays. . . . To her credit . . . she doesn't arbitrarily squelch those who question the wholesome reading of both texts, (But one boy got short shrift when he tried to show that *Romeo* was merely so bound by his sense of honor that he trapped himself into keeping the false promise of arbitrary lust.") Here we have the letdown (squelch if you will) after the build up.

The theatrical version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* occupies seven chapters or tablets, the term mythologists, anthropologists and Bayliss use. The tablets end when Gilgamesh forms a bond with his rival for power and love, the wildman Enkidu. One presumes that if the last book in the trilogy, "Gloucestermas", is completed the remaining four tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* including the death of Enkidu, the story of the great flood, and the embryo beginnings of concepts of justice and of virtue will be presented. The title of the third volume, "Gloucestermas," may also indicate that the Festival of Saint Peter is going to get a neglected going over.

So far, in a book in which the idea of tragedy is averted or diverted, there is no real tragedy and no real suffering. Every character manages to set off the foolishness of others and one feels like echoing Puck "what fools these mortals be" or "Democritus, Junior", Robert Burton's mouthpiece, who said: "Whatever men do, vows, fears, in ire, in sport,/Joys, wanderings are the sum of my report." Caleb's mother, Mary Tremont, may be an exception. She emerged from a madhouse to which she was probably unjustly committed. After a traumatic

experience of suffering and guilt she found in Jesus and the Brotherhood of the Peaceable Kingdom an altruistic and self-sacrificing solution toward which Caleb, self-centered and bitter as he is, has no sympathy. Except for a quotation from Yeats describing the legendary Irish hero Cuchulain's pride in being unique and without progeny,* fictional character Mary Tremont's poetry is the best in the book. Sadly Cuchulain was later to have a son, Connla, whom he killed in battle.

"Gloucestertide" is not a novel about Gloucester or about fishing, though one of the more hilarious parts is a long Sir Thomas Browne-like or Herman Melville-like discussion about the difference between whaling and fishing and the design of the boats or ships involved in each occupation. This didactic dissertation in the Main-Top Bar chapter and place is interrupted when two gypsies, read truck drivers, poke their faces in, decide there are no women there (the actual words begins with "p___"), and leave, a salutary reminder that life is a dichotomy of bright and dark, refined and coarse, and intellectual and menial, and that, for the present the sun will again shine in its allotted place in this our human sphere adrift in the vast barrenness of cold and hostile cosmic space

*Title "On Baile's Strand" omitted by Bayliss.

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